

The International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. **Dr Milan Jazbec**, Member of the International Institute IFIMES, presents and analyses at the occasion of the 60th anniversary of NATO and of the 5th anniversary of the Slovene membership as well as at the enlargement with Albania and Croatia, the Slovene experiences. He points out some most important conclusions and recommendations for the benefit of future member countries from the Western Balkans. His article »**Slovenia and NATO: A Handful of Useful Experience**« is published in its entirety.



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SLOVENIA AND NATO: A HANDFUL OF USEFUL EXPERIENCES

In the May Declaration from 1989, Slovenia laid down its membership ambition in the Euro Atlantic integration process. With this, the independence project became a structural part of the integration revival across Europe, as well as its reflection. During the early nineties a lively discussion was on the way to solve the security dilemma of the newborn state, spanning from classical neutrality to the membership status in the Alliance. The latter was formalized as a foreign policy priority in the amendments to the Resolution on the Starting Points of the National Security Strategy, adopted by the Slovene Parliament in January 1994. In the following years two events could be pointed out, namely the NATO Madrid Summit in June 1997 and launching of the Alliance's new tool for the candidate countries, the Membership Action Plan.

A DECADE FOR THE MEMBERSHIP

Slovenia achieved its membership ambition during the course of a decade – from January 1994 till March 2004, a series of events, activities and processes took place, with the broad participation of the political and expert communities, as well as the broader public, governmental and nongovernmental institutions, various individuals and media, be it from Slovenia or from NATO member countries and structures, as well as from third countries.

In March 1994, Slovenia was the first among the aspirant countries to join the newly established Partnership for Peace Programme. It was also the first one, which established the Interministerial Working Group for achieving NATO membership, consisting of senior officials from various ministries and agencies. This was followed by broad and intensified participation in various programmes and activities, offered by the Alliance, to prepare the interested countries for the membership. The whole process included military, defense, security, political and other sectors, which referred to NATO and its programmes. The political aspect stood out in particular during the years 1996 and 1997, in the period preceding directly the Madrid Summit, when Slovene expectations were very high, articulating in the expectation of invitation.

Foreign policy and diplomatic activities, combined with the results of the reform process, contributed to the support of influential member countries, although the much desired invitation was not extended to Slovenia, primarily due to off-stage political combinations. This resulted, from one point of view, in an obvious disappointment of the main political protagonists in membership, but from another point of view – what became apparent only later – opened vast space for the continuation of the reform process. It became broader, more coherent and continuous, with upgraded and in-depth communication with the Alliance and its member states. At the end of the 1997 Slovenia established its mission to NATO.

In the beginning of 1998, the Slovene Government presented its national strategy for NATO membership, which helped to keep the momentum and the ambition alive. A couple of months later, NATO organized in Slovenia, for the first time on the territory of a partner country, the Cooperative Adventure Exchange military exercise with participation of more than 6000 soldiers from many member and partner countries. This was actually the first encounter of Slovenia with NATO on such a broad basis.

In the autumn of 1999 Slovenia starts participating in the Membership Action Plan (MAP), the new NATO tool for candidate countries. MAP presents a broad document, which helps to bring countries closer to the membership, with particular emphasis on five areas, namely political-economic, defense, resources, security and legal. It focuses on continuity and broadness of the reform process, results of which should be shown through constant, in-depth and demanding dialog with the Alliance. The experiences of the previous seven members show they were much better prepared for

the membership than the three from 1997. It also shows that Slovenia has usefully invested time from Madrid 1997 to Prague 2002.

The Slovene public opinion support for the membership differed through the mentioned decade. It was more or less in favor of the membership, though support fell below 40% a couple of times. From mid 2001 till March 2003, when the membership referendum took place, a lively and broad, from time to time also very polemic, public discussion about the membership was on its way. The public awareness campaign touched upon various topics (like the necessity of membership as such, costs, alternatives), which above all established broad, indepth and direct communication between public and representatives of the defense, military and security structures. That was an important dimension in the Slovene public discourse on current political issues. Slovenia stands out among the group of 2004 members with this experience. The positive result from the referendum (66% in favor, 60% turnout) was an important political back-up for membership, which, following the invitation from the Prague Summit in November 2002, materialized on March 23, 2004 (a year after the referendum).

USEFUL AND HETEROGENEOUS EXPERIENCE

Slovenia's cooperation with and within NATO so far presents a handful of useful and heterogeneous experience for its further activities, as well as for future member countries, in particular those from the Western Balkans. This experience could be viewed from three points in time, namely from the decade of pre-membership activities, after the first membership year, and after five years of membership.

Firstly, the membership project was conceptualized and perceived as a state project and not as of only the Foreign and the Defense Ministries and the Slovene Armed Forces, although their activities dominated in the public eye. This was to a certain extent normal, hence additional attention for other aspects of NATO activities (like its science programmes, environmental issues, education and scholarship issues) was necessary. One could point out the following areas with the richest experience from the mentioned period: defense, military, security, organizational, psychological, sociological and the media. Having in mind the direct relation with the Alliance, the following aspects stood out: a realistic approach in planning and execution (not to promise anything beyond capabilities, or what could not be fulfilled), the ability to show constant progress in the defense reform process and transparency at work (what directly raises the level of solidarity within the Alliance). The Alliance was expecting and encouraging a responsible relationship and cooperation of the executive branch of power with the legislative one (after all, national parliaments execute democratic control of armed forces and ratify the accession protocols) as well as overall open and constant communication with the public (from Autumn 2001 till Spring 2004 more than hundred of public debates at various levels and media all around Slovenia took place, with participation of both NATO pros and cons).

Secondly, some experiences from the first membership year have been those from the previous period, although much stronger, and some new have arisen. The membership is above all the beginning of the process and not its end (some new members have understood this the other way round). A certain part of this experience is visible to the outsiders as a bureaucratic and also political routine, the major part however as a demanding organizational endeavor, which depends on the efficiency of home institutions and of their foreign policy making capabilities. A lot is being expected from a new member, although there are no special demands from her. If the new member state is not active and does not participate in various processes, it finds herself sooner or later on the margin of the Alliance. One could also say that membership is a very demanding conceptual and substantial change, for which no preparation is sufficient. In these dynamics, the focal point is aimed towards a fast and smooth structural adaptation of, primarily, foreign and defense ministries to the North Atlantic Council weekly routine work. Additionally, special attention has to be devoted to substance and policy making, since the increasing information workload could easily push substance aside. The defense planning system (resources and procurement in particular) and personnel policy tremendously gain in importance. Membership opens new promotion opportunities within various structures of the Alliance (the Slovene representative Ms. Edita Štok became the first chairwoman of the NATO medical committee, in autumn 2004). The dialogue with the public, however, remains an utmost priority.

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Thirdly, the fifth membership anniversary points out the importance and demanding nature of some of previous experiences and picks up some new ones. There is a well-established practice of learning from previous members within the Alliance, but also gaining specific experience from the new ones is part of this practice. Each single enlargement takes place in different security environment, which means that new members bring their particular historical, cultural and political tradition into the Alliance. A synergy of all of this is useful for all. Forwarding already gained experience to candidate countries and to all, who show interest for this, is part of the expected behavior within the Alliance. Year-long membership would mean the upgrading of all previous experiences, but also a need to deepen, expand and enrich them. This presents a never-ending process, which inspires the philosophy of enlargement and transformation. Its core presents the defense planning system and the capability maintenance; hence, a highly responsible and serious approach to constant fulfilment of the Alliance's mission is in place all the time. Each further enlargement has to prove this progressively.

CONCLUSION

Two aspects are of special importance while contemplating, generalizing and forwarding the Slovene NATO experience to those interested in it. Firstly, the membership ambition was a way of structural inclusion of Slovenia in the

international community and in the Euro Atlantic integration process in particular. Secondly, it was the way to establishing the national defense, military and security system, which would refer to the changed security environment after the end of the Cold War. The whole process was executed transparently and in the final phase highly intensive, with a careful attitude towards, and critically seen by, the public. Only a handful involved viewed the membership with euphoria, and Slovenia was clearly an exemption with such approach. For a great part of the supporters of the membership ambition, this never was only a point in the air, which should be achieved as soon as possible, whatever the costs and gains.

During the course of the years membership becomes a relatively boring routine for outsiders and remains a demanding political and organizational process for insiders. For the sake of both a permanent and transparent relation with public opinion is necessary. Each member state hosts sooner or later important NATO events and also important activities of the Alliance, like peace support operations and missions (for example Afghanistan), reflect critically in the public eye. Again, constant dialogue with the public is important from various points of view. Last but not least, the support of member states for the enlargement process also depends on public opinion support.

For Slovenia all these aspects share additional importance because of its support for the membership ambition of the Western Balkans countries. Their membership and activities in various NATO programmes as well as in the Alliance as such directly contribute to security and stability of the region. A welcoming of Albania and Croatia to the membership is a very important point in the history of enlargement.

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